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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/A, EB/TRA
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SUBJECT: The Iranian Border, Islam Qala and the
Informal Border Crossings

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Commercial traffic at Islam Qala, the major border crossing between Iran and Afghanistan, has declined significantly in the last few months, particularly as transshipped goods destined for Pakistan are diverted to other ports of entry. Yet, truck traffic at the "informal" border crossings in the desert has remained fairly stable and perhaps even ticked slightly upwards. The theft of imported fuel from Islam Qala storage tanks under the eyes of police and recent attacks on border officials and police mentors illustrate the complexity of fixing the border. Current Border Management Initiative plans call for a holistic approach which will significantly reduce or eliminate the tariff "leakage" being experienced. End Summary.

Decline in Truck Traffic at Islam Qala

¶2. (SBU) According to the 6th Brigade Commander, Afghan Border Police (ABP), Colonel Ayub, since March there has been a marked decrease of about 25% in truck traffic entering Afghanistan at Islam Qala (IQ). The reduced vehicle flow results principally from a decline in transshipment business as merchants who normally transship goods to Pakistan have changed their routes. Revenue reported at Islam Qala over a thirty day period covering parts of April and May demonstrate a significantly higher "per truck" collection and a higher total revenue collection.

¶3. (SBU) Ayub gave three reasons for the sudden shift away from Islam Qala as the preferred port of entry of goods destined for Pakistan. First, Taliban/AQ threats that they would burn vehicles that utilize IQ

are being taken seriously. For goods having an Afghan destination, the pressure from these anti-government elements on truckers is to use border entry points in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces. Second, freight forwarders and shippers fear that U.S.-Iranian tensions will lead to severe sanctions that would affect the border crossings from Iran. This is more sensitive for truckers carrying goods destined for Pakistan than for trucks with Afghan destinations. Third, Pakistan has reportedly lowered its tariffs just as Afghanistan, under the Border Management Initiative (BMI), is attempting to enforce its own tariff rates and procedures. For example, two weeks ago, Afghan customs began collection of a "user fee" at IQ - a fee that had always been on the books.

The "Informal" Border Crossings

¶4. (SBU) Truck traffic at the "informal" border crossings between Iran and Afghanistan (Qalatinazzar, Checkpoint 73, etc.) remains unaffected by the downturn at IQ. This is understandable, Ayub believed, since almost all goods coming through at these crossings are Iranian for the Afghan market. Moreover, only about half of the "appropriate" customs tariffs - compared to IQ and Herat -- is being charged at these crossings in the belief, Ayub explained, that collecting half of the customs tariffs is better than nothing. Otherwise, truckers will utilize the Zaranj border crossing in Nimroz where almost no revenue is being collected for the GOA.

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¶5. (SBU) Colonel Ayub has long advocated that closing most, if not all of the crossing points - perhaps leaving one open in Farah Province - is in the best interest of Afghanistan by channeling commercial traffic to the more effective official border crossing operations. The Herat representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs agrees with Ayub. Limiting the number of border crossing sites is a component of the Border Management Initiative. As the GOA applies more assertive tariff collection practices at one border post, significant truck traffic, like flowing water, will follow the path of least resistance and divert elsewhere.

Security

¶6. (SBU) In recent weeks, personal security has become a more serious issue for those working on the border. On May 18 a Taliban suicide bomber attacked a convoy of U.S. civilian Border Police mentors, killing one. Four nights later, attackers, probably tied to smuggling, ambushed and killed the ABP chief for Qalatinazzar in the desert on the Herat-Farah border. According to Ayub, the young officer had no known ties to drug lords or other dangerous factions.

Fuel Diversion

¶7. (SBU) In addition, there is significant "leakage" of imported fuel from the Islam Qala fuel storage facility. About half of the fuel offloaded at IQ from Iranian tanker trucks destined for the Ministry of Commerce is failing to make its way into the official (and taxed) fuel distribution system, perhaps as much as 10,000 lt/day. Efforts to date to halt the theft of fuel from the IQ storage tanks have not been successful. The Border Management Initiative is in the process of procuring and installing secure Hesco-concertina barriers to help improve traffic control

and eliminate theft from the fuel storage site. Meanwhile, on May 24, an ABP policeman was killed during a fight between two local tribes over "access" to fuel at the storage site. Reportedly, the tribes were claiming the remaining fuel after the Governor (or another provincial authority) allegedly had taken his share.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Until the Border Management Initiative fully kicks in, there will continue to be serious deficiencies at Islam Qala within both the Afghan Border Police and Afghan Customs. However, this is not an Islam Qala border crossing issue alone. Fix the customs and border security problems only at IQ and Herat city, and "leakages" and other problems will surface elsewhere. The BMI team has already initiated contact with the GoA regarding steps to close the informal border crossings.

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